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Letter dated 30 December 2016 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to transmit herewith a consolidated assessment of future terrorist threats, which constitutes analysis prepared within the framework of the Meeting of Heads of Special Services, Security Agencies and Law Enforcement Organizations (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have this letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council and of the General Assembly, under agenda item 108.

(*Signed*) V. **Churkin**

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Annex to the letter dated 30 December 2016 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Meeting of heads of special services, security agencies and law enforcement organizations: consolidated assessment of future terrorist threats

[Original: English]

On an ongoing basis, the Meeting of Heads of Special Services, Security Agencies and Law Enforcement Organizations conducts the work of updating collective assessments of existing terrorism-related threats and forecasting potential future ones.

Against the background of the overall increase in politico-military tensions and intrasocietal divisions in the countries of the Middle and Near East, Central and South-East Asia and Africa, there is a continuing trend towards the rapid spread of radical ideological concepts that provide a fertile ground for the activity of international terrorist organizations.

Proclaiming a transborder Islamist state and turning it into a new centre of gravity for extremists from different parts of the globe has become a paramount goal in the context of international terrorism. Another powerful driver has been the major increase in the level of aggressiveness of Islamist groups, specifically indicated in their urge to levy "asymmetric" war against the States that are participating in international counter-terrorism efforts by launching large-scale terrorist campaigns in the territories of those States so as to bring about maximum human losses.

Under these circumstances, of special importance would be the assessment of the situation in the most "troubled" regions, as well as the identification of the trends that are most typical of specific international terrorist organizations. On the basis of those premises, members of the global community could take a common approach to designing measures to counter the most prominent terrorism-related threats, as set out below.

1. Middle East: activities of international terrorist organizations

The activities of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Jabhat Fath al-Sham[1] and other terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq are currently seen as a principal source of terrorism-related threats exerting greater influence on the security situation in different world regions.

The strikes on the terrorist orders of battle carried out by the Syrian Army, Russia's Aerospace Forces and the United States-led anti-terrorist coalition proved to be efficient. In 2016, the total strength of ISIL in Syria and Iraq dropped to 20,000 fighters, according to some estimates. Certain changes have been introduced into the operational strategy of ISIL, along with a tendency towards refraining from frontal engagements with government troops and returning to guerrilla and asymmetric warfare tactics.

[1] Prior to July 2016, known as Jabhat al-Nusra.

Jabhat al-Nusra, being a branch of Al-Qaida, has focused on establishing an Islamist state in Syria and also striving to bring other radical Salafist outfits of regional extraction together under its control. Having merged a number of smaller extremist groups rejecting the ceasefire, Jabhat al-Nusra has improved its operational posture. In particular, the group has intensified terrorist operations in Syria's north, specifically, in Aleppo province, as well as in the eastern and north-eastern parts of Lebanon. In the foreseeable future, there is a likelihood that Jabhat al-Nusra will extend its activity to other regional neighbours of Syria, as well as perpetrate terrorist attacks by the foreign fighters enrolled by the group.

Despite Jabhat al-Nusra's claims of dissolving the alliance with Al-Qaida and rebranding itself as Jabhat Fath al-Sham in an attempt to elude the strikes by the coalition, the group may presumably continue its terrorist activity.

Meanwhile, Al-Qaida's leadership has been showing an ambition to revitalize operational activity in the Syrian conflict zone, which suggests further aggravation of the rivalry with ISIL. Given this setting, the increase in recruitment activities on the part of Al-Qaida in a number of countries across the Middle East is predictable.

There has been an increase in the number of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula operating in Yemen and Saudi Arabia; this is happening against the backdrop of the rapidly deteriorating security situation in both countries. Apart from that, Yemeni and Saudi territories have been used by several groups affiliated with ISIL, as well as the two Yemeni groups known as Ansar al-Sharia and Jund al-Khilafah. The armed conflict in Yemen enables the continuing enlargement of this terrorism hotbed, along with the spread of terrorism-inspiring ideology across the Gulf region.

In Turkey, there have been indications of a sharp rise in the level of terrorism-related threats. Spectacular attacks have been occurring more frequently throughout the country, resulting in numerous fatalities.

In Egypt, terrorist groups have expanded the zone of their operations from Sinai to the entire territory of the country. Members of the local branches of ISIL are pursuing a number of goals, including the attacking of military installations, the commission of terrorist acts and the taking of hostages, targeting foreign nationals in Egypt's major cities. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis has partially retargeted its subversive activities at a number of urban centres to launch more attacks in coordination with the Muslim Brotherhood and a number of terrorist groups based in Libya and the Gaza Strip, specifically Jaysh al-Islam, Jama'at al-Tawhid, the Eastern Mujahidin Shura Council, Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Sunna and Ansar al-Sharia.

2. Terrorist activity in the Afghanistan-Pakistan zone; new threats emerging in Central and South-East Asia

Currently, Afghanistan and Pakistan make up an operational theatre for multiple terrorist groups, including the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, ISIL, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Islamic Jihad Union and Jundallah.

It should be noted that, in view of the existing discord between the Taliban and ISIL, with regard to both the ideology and the tactics of the two outfits, the likelihood of their structural merger at the present stage is assessed as low.

Nevertheless, the very presence in Afghanistan of the local Taliban groups, known to have midterm plans pertaining to Central Asian countries, gives every reason for regional security concerns.

Having set up in Afghanistan a regional wilayat under the name of "Khorasan", ISIL has been steadily increasing its operational activity in the country since the beginning of 2016. However, the elimination of the group's leader, Hafiz Saeed Khan, has had a demotivating effect on the fighters. The improvement of the operational posture of ISIL in the north of Afghanistan in the near future could be a primary source of insecurity for the entire region, as the group might try to turn Central Asia into its new operational base.

In particular, one of the locally operating groups that pledged allegiance to ISIL was the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which is known to be planning to shift its operational priorities from the Afghanistan-Pakistan zone towards Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The formation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan previously based in Pakistan's Federally-Administered Tribal Areas had mostly been redeployed to the eastern and northern parts of Afghanistan. Displaying their loyalty to and support for ISIL have been Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, Jundallah, Lashkar-e-Islam and some other regionally identifiable terrorist groups. Concurrently, there are indications of a merger between ISIL and Taliban forces, with the latter claiming control over 60 per cent of the territory in the northern Afghan provinces of Badghis, Faryab, Jawzjan, Sari Pul, Badakhshan, Baghlan and Kunduz, all of which are within the immediate proximity of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

In practical terms, the entire northern part of Afghanistan bordering Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan has been considered by regional and international terrorist groups as a forward base to be used in importing terrorism from the Afghanistan-Pakistan zone to Central Asia. It serves as a destination point for militants arriving from Central Asian republics, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, Russia and the People's Republic China. Meanwhile, leaders of ISIL have been preparing the ground for further destabilization in Central Asian States.

In South-East Asia, regional groups of Islamist extremists, most of which have a historical record of collaborating with Al-Qaida, have more frequently been changing their sympathies in favour of ISIL, with a view to improving their own status and financial situation. Over 20 regional terrorist groups have already stated their support for ISIL.

In 2016, on the Philippine island of Mindanao, a new umbrella-type outfit was set up under the banner of ISIL, incorporating several groups, namely, Harakat al-Islamiyya, Jamaat Ansar al-Sharia, Jamaat Harakat al-Ansar in the Sulu Archipelago and Ansar al-Khalifa, all of which include former members of Jemaah Islamiyah. While their intermediate goal is to establish a regional wilayat of ISIL in Mindanao, the ultimate objective has been defined as proclaiming the "Daulah Islamiyah Nusantara", another Islamic "caliphate" encompassing the territories of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines.

3. Africa: activities of terrorist organizations

Internal instability has been the primary factor that has made Libya attractive to multiple regional and international terrorist groups. They include Al-Qaida in the

Islamic Maghreb, ISIL, Al-Mourabitoun, the Ansar al-Sharia Brigade, the Zintan Revolutionaries Military Council, the Martyrs of 17 February Brigade, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council, the Darnah Mujahidin Shura Council and the local factions of the Muslim Brotherhood. Without any discernible centralized command function, these outfits are bound to confront each other.

ISIL has been actively building stronger operational capability in the northern and north-eastern parts of Libya at the expense of the militants redeployed from Syria and Iraq and locally recruited extremists. Allied with ISIL are the Islamic Youth Shura Council and some units of the Ansar al-Sharia Brigade. ISIL, whose military strength in Libya is estimated at 6,000 fighters, exercises control over a number of urban settlements in the country's north, as well as three locally established "wilayats" (namely, "Fezzan", "Tarabulus" and "Barqa").

In the near term, the Group's main objective with regard to Libya is to capture the Mediterranean shoreline sector stretching from Nawfaliyah to Benghazi, as this would enable the group to use Libyan territory as a strategic "launch pad" for advancing to other countries of Africa, as well as for the insertion of terrorist elements into Europe. In the event of a total debacle of ISIL in Syria and Iraq, the possibility of the relocation of the group's principal stronghold to Libya should not be ruled out.

Notwithstanding that, the refusal on the part of the majority of Libya's population and tribesmen to accept the ideology of ISIL could contribute to the group's further loss of ground in the country.

North African branches of Al-Qaida have likewise been displaying a steadily high level of operational activity. Specifically, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, with Algeria, Tunisia and Mali as the primary theatre of its operations, improved its own operational posture in 2015 and 2016. The group succeeded in structurally merging the two largest terrorist insurgent groups of the Sahara-Sahel zone, namely, Al Mourabitoun and the Movement for Monotheism and Jihad in West Africa; before the merger, both groups had reportedly operated autonomously for a long time. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb has also been seeking an alliance with the groups known as Ansar al-Din and the Macina Liberation Front.

In West Africa, the Multinational Joint Task Force, established under the auspices of the Lake Chad Basin Commission to fight Boko Haram, has thus far failed to eliminate the threat posed by the above-mentioned terrorist group. Despite abandoning its grip on a significant share of its previous territorial gains, Boko Haram still has subversive capabilities and is currently expanding the scope of its terrorist activities, switching tactically from insurgency to an "asymmetric response". There has been an increase in the group's aggressiveness; in recent months, Boko Haram has staged a series of large-scale bombing attacks at sites where large numbers of people gather (markets and transportation terminals, among other places), using vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices and suicide operatives. Having been ousted from its principal strongholds in Nigeria, Boko Haram is making additional efforts to exfiltrate into neighbouring countries, including Cameroon, the Niger and Chad, so as to have a better chance of restoring its operational infrastructure.

The greater emphasis on violence on the part of Boko Haram could be explained by the previously announced merger of the group with ISIL, a step that, in the view of Boko Haram leaders, could offer new opportunities for logistical procurement from Libya and the replenishment of militant cadres at the expense of ISIL as a parental outfit.

Likewise, the Al-Shabaab terrorist group, whose theatre of operations has been the Horn of Africa, has recently sustained serious losses. The level of its activity is still fairly high, as the group demonstrates its ability to strike at military and other governmental targets in Somalia, Kenya and other countries. The group's modus operandi is rather versatile: it includes suicide bombing attacks in public places and, most recently, attacks on commercial airliners.

4. Activities of international terrorist organizations in other regions

ISIL took over from Al-Qaida the flagship role in staging large-scale terrorist campaigns against different States. In particular, the United States, Australia, Canada, Belgium, Denmark and France have already been attacked by ISIL supporters.

Unlike Al-Qaida, with its hallmark sophisticated attacks that evoke a broad public response but that require sophisticated time- and fund-consuming planning efforts, ISIL has been relying on technologically simple and less costly modi operandi and equipment, focusing on creating the maximum number of victims. Most of the implements that would be necessary for the perpetration of attacks are procured by ISIL operational cells in place, at their own expense. In particular, the improvised explosive devices used in Western Europe were made of commercially available materials and substances at a total cost of less than €500. This obviates the need for sustainable flows of funds from overseas sponsors, thus leaving less compromising signs on the part of its cells acting in the West.

In the near term, extremist groups, above all ISIL, will retain their determination and practical ability to mount high-visibility terrorist attacks in western countries in the form of spontaneous and synchronized strikes on several targets, involving various methods and equipment, as this tactic has proved to be efficient in the past. To maximize psychological impact, terrorists will select poorly protected targets with a heavy public attendance factor so as to ensure the highest kill probability in retaliation for their own losses from the international coalition's strikes in Syria and Iraq, as well as to provoke panic in Western societies with the ensuing confrontation between the public and the authorities.

Leaders of ISIL have stated their readiness to carry out operations in any part of Europe; to advance the goals of the terrorist campaign on the Continent, they have plans to set up a dedicated branch within the group's structure tasked with operating exclusively within a European theatre, with all available resources consolidated under its command. Operational planning by ISIL with respect to Europe has gone as far as to consider the possibility of using immigrant workers in terrorist attacks targeting holiday resorts. In April 2016, members of the group stated their intention to attack Germany in line with the Brussels scenario. Specific threats have also been addressed to the United Kingdom, Portugal and Hungary.

Emissaries (foreign agents) of ISIL have been engaged in proactive "talent-spotting" and recruitment efforts in the countries of Europe, the Russian Federation included, either directly or via the Internet. Innovative methods of outsmarting protective security regimes are being devised, including the implantation of explosive devices into the bodies of suicide operatives and the wide use of remotely controlled equipment.

Following the example of ISIL, and in the wake of the Paris attacks, leaders of several international terrorist groups made public appeals to their European supporters to attack "apostates" in their countries of residence in any possible way. This leaves a high chance of the recurrence of violent incidents that would be commensurate in terms of material and psychological impact with the Paris, Nice and Brussels attacks, with no chance of feeling safe and secure being left to any individual State.

The countries of Europe and Central Asia, as well as Russia, are currently faced with security threats in view of the return of foreign terrorist fighters to their respective source countries, coupled with the existence of "sleeper cells" in their territories, which have been nurtured by international terrorist groups over the past several years, as well as the large number of adherents to radical Islamic teachings.

The analysis of the current situation in the countries where the highest levels of activity by international terrorist organizations have been indicated, as well as the analysis of the recent tendency towards greater emphasis on external operations in the overall context of the activity of terrorist groups, suggest that ISIL remains a principal source of terrorism-related threats to the majority of members of the global community.

The proactive efforts of ISIL focused on advancing public radicalization in a number of countries, along with broadening the scope of its propaganda and recruitment campaigns, which, inter alia, involve the wide use of the Internet, as well as the practical implementation of the group's strategy, which implies seeking new regional alliances and establishing the global "caliphate", are altogether leading to the emergence of new focal points of terrorism and general instability in the countries of the Middle and Near East; North, West and East Africa; and Central, South and South-East Asia, concurrently improving the capability of terrorist elements to operate underground in Western countries.

The most discernible and persistent trends that are typical of ISIL and a number of other international and regional terrorist organizations, and that are engendering new terrorism-related threats to members of the global community, are set out in the paragraphs below.

Enlargement of social support for terrorism as a result of rapidly progressing general public radicalization in different parts of the world

There have been indications of rapid growth of radicalization in the countries of the Muslim world, as well as within Western Muslim communities. Aggressive ideological indoctrination and propaganda by ISIL have been the main trigger in that regard. Emissaries of ISIL have, either directly or via the Internet, been selecting and recruiting mercenary fighters. Meanwhile, in the Middle East, there are about 20,000 foreign terrorist fighters of more than 86 nationalities. In Syria,

foreign terrorist fighters make up an important part of the militant cadres of ISIL, Jabhat Fath al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham. As regards the national composition of the foreign fighters' contingent within the ranks of ISIL, they are mostly of North African, Middle Eastern, Central and South-East Asian and European origin, as well as natives of Russia and Turkey.

In addition to rallying new supporters around the ISIL banner, the propaganda campaign inspired by the group serves the purposes of a terrorist version of psychological warfare, intended primarily to intimidate the population and security force personnel and typically coming in the form of the circulation, either on the Internet or through other public media, of images of beheadings and other atrocities.

As regards the dissemination of printed propaganda materials, ISIL relies heavily on presenting the tenets of Islam in a distorted way in an attempt to legitimize its own inhumane acts, thus ensuring the inflow into its putative dominion of new victims indoctrinated with "counterfeited" Islam.

General increase in the scope of terrorism-related threats presupposed by the return of foreign terrorist fighters to their countries of origin

The return of foreign terrorist fighters has been a markedly destabilizing factor in many countries. Extremists who have seen battle in Syria and Iraq join locally existing radical outfits or otherwise set up "from scratch" highly clandestine cells on behalf of international terrorist groups, actively engaging in preparing terrorist attacks, raising funds for terrorist purposes, propagating radical views and recruiting new followers.

In this respect, international cooperation could be strengthened, by introducing an appropriate legal framework and taking adequate administrative regulatory measures aimed at stricter controls over mercenaries departing for conflict zones as well as returning to their respective countries of origin.

International terrorist organizations displaying a greater urge to impose sustainable control over sizeable territories with a view to setting up quasi-State entities

Raising up an "army" of many thousands of extremists, ready to travel to terrorist operational theatres in different parts of the world following directions from Islamist ideological centres, has provided international terrorism with unprecedented opportunities. The very idea and the prototype model of the "caliphate" introduced by ISIL have become a universal banner for extremist elements, whose regional affiliations may range from Western Europe to South-East Asia. This particular trend indicates that terrorism has reached a new level of public security threat, and also points to the structural merger of different terrorist outfits, irrespective of their political or ideological roots, as well as to the growing level of their organization. As a result of such mergers, the groups that had showed little activity in the past could be growing more aggressive, as they tend to copy the most violent patterns of their new parental outfits.

International terrorist organizations widely employing "individual terror" tactics

One of the central and most workable public messages repeatedly exploited by extremist groups over the past several years has been the concept of "individual

terror", originally professed by Al-Qaida and taken over by ISIL for the purposes of remote (online) recruitment targeted at Europeans. Notably, 82.5 per cent of the attacks recorded in Europe during the period 2004-2015 were perpetrated by stand-alone ("lone wolf") actors, with responsibility for only 17.5 per cent of attacks falling on organized cells or groups. Likewise, out of the total number of ISIL-associated attacks, only in 33 per cent of cases were the attacks directly organized and perpetrated by the operational cells run by the group. In the remaining 67 per cent of cases, the attackers were individuals inspired by ISIL propaganda, with their behaviour fitting in exactly with the "individual terror" concept. Sometimes the role of extremist centres in the preparation of attacks could be limited to maintaining a robust and secure channel for communications between co-conspirators, for which purpose commercially available software tools for Internet-traffic encryption are widely used. Making use of these advanced technical features enables foreign-based operational controllers to provide their European "agents in place" with detailed instructions regarding the selection of targets, sources of weapons procurement and practical advice on the assembling and tactical application of improvised explosive devices, among other things.

Typical targets of such "remotely controlled" ("standoff") attackers are critical infrastructure and crowded areas. In most cases, suicide attacks have the strongest psychological effect. Employing this tactic, international terrorist organizations and their extremist supporters have better chances of intimidating the population and generally destabilizing the situation without too much expenditure and effort.

International terrorist organizations showing more interest in using modern-day information and communications technologies

International terrorist organizations have been making broad use of cyberspace for the purposes of propagating radical views, recruiting new members, finding alternative sources of fundraising, collecting intelligence on potential targets and enabling secret communications and hacker attacks. Recently, all of these activities have been marked by an increased level of technological expertise. This has reflected accordingly on both the volume and the quality of propaganda materials. To spread these materials, popular Internet services, social networks and mobile telephony platforms (messengers) have been used, specifically Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Friendica, Quitter, Telegram and Viber, among others. Professional bloggers also account for part of this activity. The most notorious international terrorist groups normally run several media centres; their content policies are oriented towards specific target audiences and include broadcasting in different languages. Typical examples of Internet-based information resources with a rapidly growing user rating are the ISIL-controlled "Al-Hayat" media centre and *Dabiq* online magazine, both of which are known to disseminate materials intended to facilitate ISIL-supportive propaganda and recruitment in countries with predominantly Muslim populations.

The propaganda videos released by ISIL are characterized by a sufficiently high quality of camerawork, normally accompanied by a variety of special effects and other features so as to gain popularity with a young audience. Their role is important in the context of inculcating radical narratives in the minds of members of ethnic communities living in Europe, Central Asia and Russia. Apart from that, they serve as one of the primary engines of the popularization of "individual terror".

The engagement of Internet providers and major commercial stakeholders in the field of applying information and communications technologies in coordination with the security authorities of different countries remains a matter of paramount importance in terms of denying terrorists access to relevant communication facilities.

International terrorist organizations diversifying major sources of financial support, and also seeking alternative fundraising opportunities

Financial stability is one of the chief criteria for being an operationally successful terrorist group. Identifying the sources of funding and cutting off channels of fundraising remain among the biggest challenges in targeting international terrorist organizations. The problem has been further aggravated in view of the new possibilities on the part of terrorists, who have been able to diversify their sources of financial support. To ensure steady revenues, ISIL has introduced within the territories under its control a far-flung economic system providing access to a very wide range of funding sources, including the oil trade, the extraction of and trade in other natural resources, proceeds from agricultural production, enormous amounts of taxes and other fiscal duties levied on the local population and businesses, the plundering and selling abroad of items of cultural and artistic value, and the proceeds resulting from the commission of general crimes. The drop in the amount of ISIL oil profits, resulting from the airstrikes carried out by the international coalition and Russia's Aerospace Forces, have been compensated for by levying more taxes on the population in the captured areas.

Nonetheless, the group has had to cut the amount of the salaries paid to its militants, as well as to end its financial support for its imposed governing bodies and the delivery of social aid programmes to the people of the "caliphate". Combined with the loss of a considerable portion of the previously captured territories, this has been seen as an impediment to the positioning of ISIL as a quasi-State entity, and has basically led to a lessening of the group's popularity.

Among the principal methods of preventing the further spread of terrorism-related threats are designing and applying workable measures against the financing of terrorist groups at both the domestic and the international levels, including by solving controversies on this matter on the part of such authoritative international bodies as the United Nations, the Financial Action Task Force and the Egmont Group (the latter of which coordinates the activities of financial intelligence units in a number of countries).

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Further monitoring with respect to the chief factors and trends pertaining to the activities of regional and international extremist organizations would be helpful in terms of forecasting related threats, either in specific regions or in specific countries. The assessment of these threats would help conciliate the approaches of different countries and combine their efforts to counteract international terrorism both effectively and efficiently.